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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [EAID](#) [LI](#)

SUBJECT: LIBERIA: AMBASSADOR DISCUSSIONS PREP FOR 2011 RACE
WITH ELECTIONS COMMISSION

REF: MONROVIA 826

¶1. SUMMARY: The Ambassador met with the National Elections Commission (NEC) November 28 to discuss preparations for the 2011 presidential election. NEC shares our view that a free, fair, and on-time election is a crucial milestone in Liberia's democratic transition, but remains concerned any further delay by the Legislature will make it difficult to complete everything in time. NEC expressed its gratitude for ongoing USG assistance, and was pleased to hear from USAID that its new building should be ready in a year. END SUMMARY.

PREPARATION FOR 2011

¶2. NEC Chairman James Fromayan expressed his frustration that the Legislature did not pass the threshold population bill (reftel) before it recessed for break and complained that Members from rural counties were doing whatever they could to stall it. He said he wished House Speaker Alex Tyler (from rural Bomi County) had shown more leadership in fulfilling the Legislature's mandate to set the threshold rather than selfishly worrying about his own seat. Co-Chairman Elizabeth Nelson worried that the Legislature would settle the issue by apportioning seats to particular counties, side-stepping NEC's constitutional mandate to delineate districts based upon the most recent census.

¶3. On voter registration, Nelson stressed that it was important that NEC allow six months to a year to do the process well. With many refugees who have returned home and many youth who have turned 18 since the last registration in 2005, any election held using the 2005 register would not reflect the will of today's Liberian people. After the meeting, the Commissioners took the Ambassador to see their voter registration software system.

¶4. Fromayan said that in order to hold a Constitutional referendum on the election of local officials, the Legislature would first need to pass the Boundary Harmonization Exercise bill that is before it. That bill establishes criteria for what constitutes a "city" and officially names only Monrovia and the 15 county seats as cities. NEC could not possibly organize elections for the hundreds of "cities" (some with population of less than 100) that are currently on the books, but it would be able to manage elections for those 16 cities. Fromayan again accused the Legislature of dragging their feet on this bill.

¶5. Fromayan said he expected fewer presidential candidates in 2011 (vice the 22 who ran in 2005) because smaller parties would form coalitions. Fromayan also said that NEC expected to win its court case soon to close ten "briefcase" parties that do not have the required Monrovia-based headquarters to be considered legally legitimate. He said that NEC had to be flexible on party regulations in 2005 because the country was just emerging from war, but said that NEC would be much stricter about enforcing the rules for the next race. He said having fewer candidates would help Liberian parties to move past being personality-based to being more

policy-platform orientated.

USG ASSISTANCE

16. All of the NEC Commissioners were pleased to hear that USAID would finish the bidding process on NEC's new building in January and should complete the structure within a year. Fromayan was grateful for USG-funded International Foundation for Electoral Systems' support to NEC and its promotion of civic education throughout Liberia. Fromayan, who just returned from an IV program to observe our presidential election, was impressed by American voters' enthusiasm and by the "maturity" of U.S. democracy, including how Senator McCain gracefully conceded defeat.

17. COMMENT: The presence of the entire commission at the meeting (except for one commissioner who was unable to attend) demonstrated the NEC's appreciation for U.S. assistance. NEC shares our view that a free, fair, and on-time 2011 election is a crucial milestone in Liberia's democratic transition, but is clearly worried about delays in the Legislature passing the requisite legislation. We will continue to raise the issue with Executive and Legislative leaders and stress that Liberia's second successful presidential election will be a signal to the world that democracy has finally grown strong roots here. END COMMENT.
THOMAS-GREENFIELD